

Addressing Political Polarization with Anekantavada

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Multi-party democracy is now considered to be an ideal form of government since many such democracies have contributed to the stability and prosperity of the country. Multi-party democracy has one major disadvantage. For a party to win in an election, a party must distinguish itself from others and convey to the voters that all other parties are flawed. In many cases political competition has spawned populism that can hurt the society and even intolerance and violence. In this paper I will discuss why successful multiparty democracies need to embrace *anekantavada* (the Jain principle of validity of multiple points of view) in some form. The article discusses how governments can remain stable and progressive by minimize the waste of time, social interaction, and opportunities by following *anekantavada*, even when polarization is present. If political polarization is not checked, a society can experience unnecessary conflict. In the extreme cases, a nation could be taken over by extremism with no freedom of thought. Militant polarization can cause some nations to get divided or encounter a collapse. The article examines example from India as well as the rest of the world that illustrate the need to avoid *ekanta*, which is opposite of *anekanta*.

Key words- Anekanta, democracy, intellectual honesty, political polarization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Anekantavada (literally the principle that something can be viewed from different perspectives) is the Jain principle of accepting that often there exist multiple perspectives that take different, even sometimes opposite, views of the same reality. These views can be argued to be valid by viewing a part of the reality (Jain 2012). The concept is illustrated by the classic parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant. Each person perceives the elephant to different, one as a snake, one as a tree trunk, one as a wall etc. The individual perspectives are not wrong, and not necessarily opposed to each other, rather incomplete views of the same reality.

The doctrine originated with Lord Mahvira, the 24th Jain tirthankara. Buddhist texts *Samaññaphala Sutta* refer to the principle as one of the differences between him and Gautam Buddha. The was discussed by Acharyas Kundakunda and Umaswati. The

term Anekanta was formally formulated by Acharya Siddhasen Divakar. It has been a central principle in the Jain philosophy and practices.

Anekantavada is widely applicable in secular life of individuals as well as groups in the human society. A nation considers its strong military with advanced weapons as a defensive capability that will promote peace, whereas a rival nation will consider that a major threat.

In this article we specially look at multiparty democracies with multiple parties, at least two, vie for political power. Since the eighteenth century, more and more nations have adapted some form of a multiparty democracy. Historically, some forms of democracies were present in ancient India, Greece and Rome. However absolute rule by a single person was much more common. Modern political system with political parties is considered to have evolved in Britain in the 18th century. The Tory supported a strong monarchy whereas the Whigs supported a constitutional monarchy. The Tory party evolved into the modern Conservative party and the Whigs evolved into the Liberal party. The Liberal party was eventually eclipsed by the Labor party which has ruled UK frequently or has been the major opposition.

The Labor party is regarded to be a center-left party. The terms left and right to describe the political spectrum originated from the French revolution of 1789, when supporters of the *Ancien Régime* sat on the right-hand side and the supporters of the revolution sat on the left hand side when the *Estates General* assembly was convened. The terms left and right have become important descriptors of economic political polarization. The parties on the left promote egalitarianism. The very extreme left parties include Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot in Cambodia and Naxalites (Communist Party of India-Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) founded by Charu Majumdar etc, which consider a violent armed struggle to be a legitimate means of achieving their goals. From an economic perspective the extreme Right in India was represented by the Swatantra party founded by Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, which opposed government control of the economy.

Political polarization can include the dimension of nationalism or religious beliefs. Some of the political parties draw inspiration from a nation's past or beliefs. The extreme examples include the Taliban in Afghanistan or some of the political/religious parties in Pakistan that regard other traditions to be malignant that need to be stamped out or severely restricted. In some cases, factions of a political party seek identification of a nation with a specific region. For example the evangelical conservatives regard US to be Judeo-Christian nation, whereas other

Americans, such as the former president Barack Obama, reject the concept (Hare 2014, Iyengar 2019).

In some cases, parties drawing strength from national/religious concepts, are regarded to be on the right. In reality, the two dimensions, government control of the economy and nationalist/religious affiliation can be orthogonal. Extreme Maoism can be regarded to be a religious dogma, which advocates centralized control. In India, early Congress leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel drew inspiration from Hinduism, yet they saw India as a secular nation (Carothers 2020). India's ruling BJP accepts Hindutva but does not seek to establish a theocratic state. In terms of economic philosophy, it accepts some government control. It has implemented some protectionism but has also promoted private enterprise to some extent.

In the past few decades, Europe has accepted a large number of migrants, mainly from impoverished Middle Eastern or North African nations and has embraced pluralism. In recent years, the sentiments in Europe are turning against pluralism and towards nationalism.

2. WHAT CAUSES POLARIZATION?

Promoting an extreme view on an issue can be politically attractive. A significant fraction of the population finds a polarized view is simple to accept and thus can be politically popular. Many find it too hard to understand and accept complex concepts that combine multiple perspectives. As an example, egalitarianism uses the premise that everyone should be equal. That can imply that everyone should be able to live well, regardless of intellectual capabilities, responsibilities, and effort level. That was the prevailing dogma in communist countries. In countries with an official religion, a large part of the population believes that their religion is final truth, and anything contrary to that, as declared by the influential scholars, is false or even evil.

A dogmatic society will eventually stagnate, and some thinkers will start questioning the dogma. When I visited China in 1988 at the invitation of some Chinese professors, one of them informed me that some of the scholars in China have started expressing the view that they are lagging and some of the past leaders have made mistakes. Some prominent Chinese scholars had concluded that Marxism can coexist

with a market economy. That was the time when Deng Xiaoping and his followers had captured power in China and had started a program of liberalization.

For a government or a society to sustain faith in the dogma, it needs to exclude or minimize any opposing views using an authoritarian control over the views discussed.

Scholars have noted that people identify themselves as a member specific group or community, and thus willing to accept polarization (Anderson 2023, Achenbach 2024). The group becomes an *echo chamber*, where everyone repeats the same view, and thus reinforcing the dogma.

In recent years researchers have identified social media as a major contributor to polarization. People who belong to a few related groups in Facebook or WhatsApp, tend to listen to the same views because the algorithms underlying the selection of suggested posts select posts read in the past (Kubin 2021, Nix 2023).

Social Identity is a significant driver of polarization. People tend to align themselves with social groups that share similar values and beliefs. This identity can contribute to a sense of "us versus them," resulting in political polarization. Economic disparities in wealth and income can promote resentment and dissatisfaction, which is often exploited by the politicians. Policies related to economic issues become polarized as leaders of different groups advocate for their voters. In USA, views on immigration have caused significant polarization.

3. PROBLEMS WITH POLARIZATION

Political polarization, if not checked can lead to a number of problems, negatively impacting the and the functioning of democratic governments.

In USA, legislative gridlock causes difficulty in reaching bipartisan agreements. Pragmatic politicians struggle to find common ground on important issues, while the legislators clinging to an extreme view can block the progress leading to legislative stagnation. In USA, that has even led to downgrading of the government credit level. Extreme polarization may lead to the erosion of democratic norms and principles. This can cause challenges to the rule of law, attacks on the independence of institutions, and a weakening of democratic checks and balances. In USA, a highly

indoctrinated mob attacked the US Capitol building on June 6, 2021, where the final results of the election were to be processed.

Polarization often leads to the adoption of policies driven by ideology than based on direct evidence and logical reasoning. This can result in nonoptimal government decisions that can waste the public resources. Sometimes the policies can shift widely when administration comes under the control of the opposing party. That can lead to policy instability and can create uncertainty for businesses and individuals.

An extreme case of a nation that has hurt itself by political polarization is seen in Pakistan. Although founded as a liberal Islamic democracy, hard line political and radical groups exert a significant control. It is believed that the military establishment had used religion to control the government, as can be seen from the laws imposed by general Zia Ul Haq, who had deposed Z.A. Bhutto and declared martial law. Because of the polarization, Pakistan has experienced economic and social decay, with no end in sight.

4. Countering the effect of polarization

A society has multiple objectives. It should promote investments and entrepreneurship which will generate jobs and produce good and services. On the other hand, the society needs to provide equal opportunities for all. It is possible for the system to come up with a decision that will yield the best results, howe that requires the politicians to take and promote an anekanta-based view, which can be hard to explain to simple minded people.

Techniques have been developed that can be used to yield the best answer to the challenges. In business, administration and engineering, a mathematical technique termed Linear programming is widely used that was developed in 1930s and 1940s. Optimization is a generalization of linear programming that attempts to maximize the beneficial aspects of a measurable quantity. When a problem is properly formulated it can be solved iteratively or by obtaining a closed form solution. Optimizing involves the impact of making a choice in one dimension that is somewhere between one extreme and the other extreme. The challenge in the problem lies in the fact that some requirements (such as the maximum value of the total cost) must be satisfied.

There exist political procedural analogues of the optimization problem. Some of them are iterative. For example, in a country, one party may adapt extreme socialistic policies. That often leads to economic stagnation. A successor government may

recognize that and introduce liberalization to enhance the economic activity in accordance with the principles of the market economy. However, such a dynamic solution may introduce instability and inefficiency. A better approach would be for the participants to evaluate the impact of different compromises and agree on the one that will yield the best results. Some of the political compromises can be mathematically evaluated. For example, the effect of increasing or decreasing specific taxes can be analyzed and the overall impact can be estimated using available data. In situations where quantification is not feasible, decisions can be made using experiences from outer countries.

It is necessary for the participants, political leaders as well as the general people, to take an *anekanta*-based perspective. To encourage that some of these measures can be used.

Social approaches: Introduce education in schools to teach critical thinking, media literacy, and an understanding of democratic principles. Encourage discussions on diverse perspectives and the importance of respectful dialogue. Support initiatives that bring together diverse communities to discuss their concerns and find common ground (Shah 2015). Support initiatives that build bridges across social, cultural, and political divides.

Political approaches: Support measures that encourage free political competition and reduce polarization. Encourage responsible journalism that emphasizes accuracy, and a fair presentation of diverse perspectives. Support leaders who prioritize bipartisanship and compromise. Encourage elected officials to work across party lines and find common ground on major issues. Support leaders who value bipartisanship and compromise.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Anekantavada is often considered to be simply philosophical. However it is widely applicable principle that can be used to help decision making in not just political, but also social and business circumstances. Considering that some variables can span multiple dimensions, an optimal and stable solution can often be found.

Muti-party democracy now prevails in not just UK, USA and India, but in numerous other countries. Polarization can cause delays, deadlocks, and loss of opportunities. It can weaken a nations fabric and impede its progress. The solution, as discussed here, is adaptation of *anekantavadi* perspective.

Although not discussed here, *syadvada* is a form of *anekantavada*. The modern theory of probability, widely used in sciences and business, is an extension of *syadvada*. Probabilities arise because of the lack of complete information. In many situations, the available information is incomplete. Acknowledging the incompleteness allows us to use probabilistic methods that can allow one to make the best decisions.

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